Verbal Disputes and Philosophical Progress

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Verbal Disputes

- Is there a distinction between questions of fact and questions of language?

- A version of the distinction is ubiquitous, in philosophy and elsewhere, in the notion of a verbal dispute.

- Intuitively, a dispute between two parties is verbal when the two parties agree on the relevant facts about a domain of concern, and just disagree about language used to describe that domain.
    - Then they are "not really disagreeing" -- except about metalinguistic questions, and about matters that derive from these metalinguistic questions.

James' Squirrel

- "The man goes round the squirrel". "No, he doesn' t!"

- James: "Which party is right depends on what you mean by 'going round' the squirrel. If you mean X, obviously the man does go round him. But if you mean Y, it is quite as obvious that the man fails to go round him. Make the distinction, and there is no occasion for any farther dispute."

Sometimes Words Matter

- Sometimes verbal disputes are important, when something rests on matters of usage:
  - For metalinguistic purposes, where words and their users are the primary domain of concern
    - Linguistics, philosophy of language, history, literary criticism
  - For quasi-legal purposes: e.g. laws, contracts, promises, conventions
    - What counts as "marriage" or "murder"?
    - "This isn't argument, it's just contradiction"
  - For rhetorical/political purposes, where words have connotations and associations
    - What counts as "torture" or "terrorism"?

Mere Verbal Disputes

- But often, when we're concerned about a first-order domain, nothing crucial rests on the usage of words.
  - Here, a verbal dispute is a *mere* verbal dispute.
  - E.g. in many areas of science, philosophy, and everyday life.

- Mere verbal disputes are usually impediments to understanding.
  - We do better if we move past these disputes and focus on substantive issues regarding a domain.

The Philosophical Interest of Verbal Disputes

- (1) As philosophical methodology:
    - Many philosophical disagreements are at least partly verbal.
    - If we can diagnose mere verbal disagreement, and move beyond it to either substantive agreement or to clarified substantive disagreement, then we've made philosophical progress.

- (2) As first-order philosophy:
    - Reflection on the existence and nature of verbal disputes can reveal something about the nature of concepts, meaning, and language.

Philosophical Examples

- Some philosophical debates that allegedly have verbal elements:
  - Free will (Hume)
  - Justification (Alston)
  - Semantics vs pragmatics (various)
  - Existence of objects (Hirsch)
  - Consciousness (Block)
  - Color (various)
  - …

What is a Verbal Dispute?

- Take a dispute where one party asserts S, another party asserts ~S. What is it for such a dispute to be verbal?

- Common suggestion:

  - A dispute over S is verbal iff the parties use S to express distinct propositions P and Q (respectively) and the parties do not disagree over the truth of P or of ~Q.

- Problem: This is an overly narrow conception. If semantic externalism is right, there are broadly verbal disputes where the condition is not met.

Same-Proposition Verbal Disputes

- A: "I am flying"
- B: "You are not flying. You're not propelling yourself about in the air"
- A: "One does not need to do that to fly".

- Here, community meaning may dictate that B and A affirm and deny the same proposition:
  - A incorrectly asserts P, while B correctly asserts ~P.

- But the debate is still verbal, in that the first-order disagreement is wholly grounded in a metalinguistic disagreement.

Another Try

- A dispute over S is (broadly) verbal when:

  - (i) for some term T in S, the parties use T differently, or (perhaps tacitly) disagree about the meaning/usage of T.

  - (ii) their dispute over S arises *in virtue* of this difference/disagreement regarding T

- I.e. a verbal dispute is one in which an apparent first-order dispute arises in virtue of a metalinguistic difference or dispute.

Heuristic

- An initial (imperfect) heuristic:

- A dispute over S is verbal with respect to a key term T if, were the subjects to agree on the meaning of T, they would agree on the truth of S

  - E.g. if we agree on the meaning of 'planet', we'll agree on 'Pluto is a planet'.
  - If we agree on the meaning of 'killed', we won't agree on 'Oswald killed Kennedy'

- Observations:
  - Meaning here isn't just extension
  - Deviant counterfactual routes must be excluded
  - Disagreements about the nature of meaning need special treatment

The Method of Elimination

- To resolve or clarify a dispute over S that is potentially verbal with respect to term T:

- The method of elimination:
    - (I) Bar the use (or the mention) of T.
    - (ii) Try to find a related S' in the new vocabulary such that the parties non-verbally disagree over S', and such that resolving the dispute over S' would at least partly resolve the dispute over S.
    - (iii) If there is such an S', the dispute is non-verbal.
    - (iv) If there is no such S', the dispute is verbal (unless …)

Notes on the Method

- The method of elimination is not
    - a reductive definition of a verbal dispute
    - a wholly mechanical procedure for determining when a test is verbal
    - an exceptionless criterion (as it stands)

- It is a heuristic device, one that allows us to use clear cases of substantive or verbal disputes to help determine the status of unclear cases.

- The exceptions to (iv) involve the exhaustion of relevant vocabulary in a limited language.

Outcomes of the Method

- If the method reveals a clearly non-verbal dispute over some related S′
    - the dispute is plausibly non-verbal
    - the parties might then focus on the more neutral question S′, leading to a clarified debate

- If there is dispute over some S′, but it is unclear whether this dispute is verbal
    - iterate the procedure
    - for efficiency, bar the use of all terms that are undisputed cognates or synonyms of T.

- If the method reveals agreement on all related S′, then typically:
    - the dispute is verbal
    - the parties can then either set aside the dispute (if interested in the first-order domain)
    - or they can focus on the metalinguistic issue (if interested in the words in their own right).

- Unless: one reaches the point of exhaustion of relevant vocabulary
    - One must determine independently whether the previous dispute was substantive or verbal

Application: Free Will

- Compatibilist: Free will is compatible with determinism.
- Incompatibilist: Free will is incompatible with determinism.

- Challenger: The dispute is verbal. You mean different things by "free will" (e.g., the compatibilist means the ability to do as one chooses, the incompatibilist means the ability to be the ultimate origin of one's choices).

- Method of Elimination: Give away "free will".

- Possible outcome 1: Dispute over (e.g.) "Moral responsibility is incompatible with determinism". A prima facie indication that the dispute is non-verbal (though one may want to reapply the test to "moral responsibility").

- Possible outcome 2: Agreement on: "Determinism is compatible with a certain degree D of moral responsibility" (and so on). Suggests a verbal dispute, resting on whether the meaning of "free will" requires more than degree D of moral responsibility.

What is X?

- Many philosophical debates center on questions of the form: What is X?
    - What is free will?
    - What is knowledge?
    - What is justification?
    - What is justice?
    - What is confirmation?
    - What is intuition?
    - What is life?
    - What is truth?
    - What is consciousness?
    - What is a verbal dispute?

- These questions are particularly liable to suffer from non-obvious verbal elements, and so are particularly good candidates for the method of elimination.

The Subscript Gambit

- Say one party says 'X is …', while the other party says 'No, X is …'. Then we can bar the use of X, and introduce new terms X1 and X2 that are stipulated to be equivalent to the two right-hand sides respectively. Then ask: do the parties have (non-verbal disagreements) involving X1 or X2?

- E.g. "free will is the ability to do what one wants" vs "free will is the ability to ultimately originate one's choices".
  - Free1 = able to do as one wants
  - Free2 = able to ultimately originate one's choices

- Do the parties differ over freedom1 and freedom2?

- Maybe over "freedom2 is required for moral responsibility", or over "freedom1 is what we truly value". This clarifies the debate.

- But maybe they agree that freedom1 conveys such-and-such variety of watered-down moral responsibility, that freedom2 would be really valuable but that freedom1 is somewhat valuable, and so on. This sort of compatibilist and incompatibilist don't really disagree.

Semantics/Pragmatics

- Say one party says that semantic (as opposed to pragmatic) properties are those associated with a sentence by linguistic convention, while another says that semantic properties are truth-conditional properties.
    - (So the former but not the latter classifies conventional implicature as semantic, while the latter but not the former classifies context-dependent truth-conditions as semantic.)

- Bar 'semantic', introduce 'semantic1', 'semantic2': Is there a residual disagreement?

- *Maybe* over: semantic1 phenomena rather than semantic2 phenomena can play such-and-such role in a linguistic theory, or a theory of understanding.

- But perhaps more likely, no substantive disagreement.

Physicalism

- Party 1: physicalism is the thesis that everything supervenes on the properties invoked by a completed physics (whether or not they're mental).

- Party 2: physicalism is the thesis that everything supervenes on the properties invoked by a completed physics and that these properties are non-mental.

- Bar 'physicalism', introduce 'physicalism1', 'physicalism2'. Is there a residual disagreement?

- Not obvious:
  - "I care more about whether physicalism1 is true"
  - "Physicalism1 is what people in the debate over X are concerned about"
  - "Physicalism1 is what matters for purpose X"

Multiple Inferential Roles

- Arguably, these definitions articulate different conceptions of physicalism, depending on what one takes to be its core *inferential role*
  - "If physicalism is true, the world is ultimately natural"
  - "If physicalism is true, physics is the ultimate comprehensive science"
  - "If physicalism is true, the mind is non-spooky"

- If we hold fixed the inferential role of 'physicalism', there may be a fact about whether physicalism is physicalism1 or physicalism2.

- But there's no need to decide which is the core role of 'physicalism'
  - Instead, admit multiple roles, with different conceptions corresponding to each
  - The choice between roles/conceptions is pragmatic, driven by one's purposes.

A Possible Reaction

- Even though we agree on all the properties of X1 and X2 as stated in non-X-involving language, we still disagree. We disagree about whether X is X1 or X2!

  - We disagree about whether freedom is freedom1 or freedom2.
  - We disagree about whether justification is justification1 or justification2.
  - We disagree about whether semantics is semantics1 or semantics2.
  - We disagree about whether physicalism is physicalism1 or physicalism2.

What's the Content/ What's the Point?

- In these cases (especially the last two), it's hard to see the *content* or the *point* of this residual disagreement, except as a metalinguistic or metaconceptual disagreement.

  - Parties might disagree on whether physicalism1 or physicalism2 best fits historical or contemporary use of 'physicalism' and 'physical' in our community. (Same for 'semantics').
  - To resolve this, do sociology/anthropology/linguistics! Nothing important in the first-order domain depends on it.

  - Parties might disagree on whether freedom1 or freedom2 best fits our ordinary *concept* of freedom -- the one that we use in thought on relevant occasions, and so on.
  - To resolve this, do psychology/psychoanalysis (plus sociology/anthropology/linguistics). Again, not much in the first-order domain depends on this, once we've clarified the first-order properties (including the value) of freedom1, freedom2, etc.

- Once we've resolved these sociological/linguistic/psychological questions, there's (arguably) nothing left to resolve.

Moral Disputes

- Some disputes can't be resolved this way.
  - Kantian: an act is right iff it has such-and-such deontological property.
  - Consequentialist: an act is right iff it has such-and-such consequence property.
- Bar 'right, introduce 'right1', 'right2'. What's the residual disagreement?

- Maybe: 'Ought people perform right1 acts or right2 acts?'
  - But 'ought' (in the relevant sense) is undisputedly cognate with 'good', so this isn't progress. Bar 'ought', introduce 'ought1', 'ought2'. What's the residual disagreement?

- As we proceed, the disagreement gets harder and harder to state.
  - Plausibly: Once all moral terms are gone, no disagreement can be stated. We might agree on all the nonmoral properties of the relevant actions, but disagree on whether it is right.

- Does this mean the dispute is verbal? Intuitively, no.
  - We've simply exhausted the relevant vocabulary.
  - At a certain point (perhaps once we've fixed on the appropriate moral "ought"), we've reached bedrock.

Consciousness

- Dispute: Is a mouse conscious?

- Apply the method of elimination. Bar 'conscious', introduce surrogates, e.g. 'phenomenally conscious', 'access-conscious'.
    - Residual question: Is a mouse phenomenally conscious? Bar 'phenomenally conscious'.
    - Around here, just close cognates are available: Is the mouse experiencing? Does it have qualia? Is there something it's like to be the mouse?

- Once enough phenomenal terms are barred, the disagreement can't be stated. We might agree on all the nonphenomenal properties of the mouse, but disagree on whether it is phenomenally conscious.

- Does this mean the dispute is verbal? Intuitively, no.

- At a certain point, e.g. "is the mouse phenomenally conscious?", we've reached bedrock.

Ontological Disputes

- Nihilist: Only particles exist
- Non-nihilist: Not only particles exist (e.g. tables and chairs exist).

- Bar 'exist', introduce
    - 'exist1' (e.g. 'X exists1' = 'X exists and is a particle')
    - 'exist2' (e.g. 'X exists2' = 'there exist particles arranged Xwise and phi('X'))
- Parties agree that only particles exist1, not only particles exist2. What's the residual disagreement?

- Intuitively: it's about whether only particles *exist*. But with absolute quantifiers barred, the dispute becomes hard or impossible to state.

- Does this mean the dispute is verbal? Intuitively (for many), no.
    - The absolute, unrestricted existential quantifier is bedrock.

Bedrock

- These results are compatible with the method of elimination. The residual disputes are all non-verbal, until one runs out of vocabulary.

- But this brings out an important point of methodology. At a certain point, when the method is applied, a proponent may say "That's bedrock"
  - E.g. what ought one to do?
  - Is the mouse phenomenally conscious?

- Here, we've reached concepts so basic (a moral ought, phenomenal consciousness) that only cognate expressions can be used to state the issue.
  - There's no hope of finding a relevant disagreement at an "underlying" level.
  - Further applications of the test will just lead to vocabulary exhaustion.

Bedrock Concepts

- Hypothesis: There is a special class of bedrock concepts that play this role.

- For bedrock concepts, we do see residual non-metalinguistic content to disputes such as: "We disagree about whether X is X1 or X2" (or about whether something is X iff it's X1 or iff it's X2), even when proponents agree on all relevant truths is non-X-involving language.
  - A difference between 'right', 'conscious', 'exist' vs. 'physicalism', 'semantic', 'free'.

- The "bedrock" card can only be played rarely. For most expressions, it isn't plausible.
  - E.g. if two people agree on all the non-"car"-involving statements about an entity, but disagree about whether it is a car, the disagreement must be verbal   (translucence).

- Of course, the question of whether a given concept is bedrock may be highly nontrivial.

Which Concepts are Bedrock?

- Really interesting/important question: What concepts (or concept-families) are bedrock?

- I think
  - Consciousness (and associated qualities)
  - Some logical/mathematical concepts
  - Nomic and modal concepts
  - Certain normative concepts
  - The concept of explanation?
  - Spatiotemporal concepts? (My view: No)

Resolution Down to Bedrock

- In effect, the method of elimination is a method for resolving philosophical disputes down to

  - (i) disputes involving bedrock concepts

  - (ii) disputes about which concepts are bedrock

- These are still highly nontrivial disputes!

- But many disputes will dissolve or clarify along the way, and the residual disputes may take a certain regimented form

Whither Conceptual Analysis?

- This picture leads to a certain deflationism about the role of conceptual analysis (whether a priori or a posteriori), and about the interest of questions such as "What is X?" or "What is it to be X?".
  - Some component of these questions is inevitably verbal, and the non-verbal residue can be found without using 'X'.

- Instead of asking "What is semantic content?" and expecting a determinate answer, one can instead focus on various roles one wants semantic content to play, and say, here are some interesting properties (of sentence or utterances): S1 can play this role, S2 can play these roles, S3 can play these roles.
  - Not much hangs on the residual verbal question of which is really semantic content.

- Same for "What is a belief?", "What is justification?", "What is confirmation?", "What is justice?", and so on.

Opponents of Conceptual Analysis

- Likewise, opponents of conceptual analysis often say "I don't care about the concept of X. I care about what X really is. Even though X1 doesn't mirror our concept of X, X really is X1."
  - E.g. Millikan on mental content (proposing teleological theory)
  - Kornblith on knowledge (proposing naturalistic theory)

- I think these proposals about what X "really is" are often implausible, as the concept of X places constraints on what it picks out. The point can be put more plausibly and more powerfully by saying:
  - "I don't care about what X is. I just care about the associated explanatory role. And X1 can play such-and-such crucial parts of that role."

Conceptual Analysis Without Ordinary Language Philosophy

- On this model, the analysis of *words* and the associated concepts is relatively unimportant in understanding a first-order domain.

- But it's still interesting and important to analyze *conceptual spaces*: the spaces of concepts (and of the entities they pick out) that are relevant to a domain, determining which concepts can play which roles, what the relevant dimensions of variation are, and so on.

- This leads naturally to *conceptual pluralism*: there are lots of interesting concepts in the vicinity of philosophical terms such as 'semantic', 'justified', 'free'.

- Likewise, it leads to pluralism about the properties these concepts pick out:
  - Semantic pluralism: lots of interesting sorts of quasi-semantic content, playing different roles
  - Epistemic pluralism: lots of different epistemic relations, playing different roles
  - And so on.

Translucence

- Let's say that sentence S is *translucent* with respect to a set of sentences T iff, when sentences T are accepted, a dispute over the truth of S is verbal.

  - The notion of translucence is central to the previous discussion, and is ubiquitous in contemporary philosophy.

- This notion is intimately related to an analytic/synthetic distinction.

  - Strong thesis: When S is translucent with respect to T for a subject (and the terms in S are used nondeferentially), then S is analytically/a priori entailed by T (for that subject).

  - Weaker thesis: Translucence is a *successor notion* to analytic/a priori entailment, and can do a significant amount of the work that these notions are supposed to do.

- I think that both theses are plausible. The latter thesis should be acceptable even to Quineans, who often tacitly employ the notion of translucence in their work.

- Of course, once we accept that translucence can play certain core roles of the analytic/synthetic distinction, the question of whether it vindicates that distinction is itself verbal!

Carnapian Conclusion

- Speculative conclusion: Might attention to verbal disputes yield a partial vindication of various Carnapian projects?

- Grounds for accepting a distinctive class of primitive concepts, and something that can play the role of an analytic/synthetic distinction.
  - Helping to reveal the logical structure of (our conception of) the world.
  - All truths translucently settled by truths in bedrock language?

- Pragmatism about conceptual frameworks:
  - Instead of focusing on words and concepts, focus on the role one needs them to play,

- A method to help clarify and resolve philosophical disputes
  - It won't resolve all disputes, but it often gets us closer to the heart of the dispute, and often makes the dispute more tractable.
  - To the extent that we can know all bedrock truths, we can know all truths